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REBUILDING A TATTERED RELATIONSHIP

BY DANA WALKER

WASHINGTON (UPI) _ Robert Gates had one regret as he sat before the Senate committee with the power to make him the youngest CIA director ever that the panel wasn't told in advance about covert U.S. arms sales to Iran.<

He promised to correct that situation in the future.<

In a tense hearing before the Senate Intelligence Committee Tuesday, Gates asserted his determination, if confirmed as the nation's top spy, to stitch up the tattered remains of the relationship between Congress and what is known as the U.S. intelligence community _ the CIA and other federal spying agencies.<

Gates devoted almost four pages of his 11 -page opening statement to the issue and more than once described the absence of congressional intelligence "oversight" as his No. 1 regret in the doomed Iran arms-Contra aid operations.<

"We must find a way to avoid valleys of mistrust in this relationship," he said in his statement. "I consider it one of my highest priorities to help re-establish mutual trust and confidence.<

"The congressional committees and executive oversight organizations ... should give the American people confidence that their intelligence service is accountable, carries out its activities according to the law and that we are guided by standards and values acceptable to them."<

The National Security Act of 1947 was amended in 1980 to require "timely notification" of Congress, specifically the intelligence committees, of important covert activity.<

The definition of "timely" has been in dispute ever since, with a special provision in the law adding to the confusion. But Gates said he has a good idea of what it means to him: no more than "several days."<

With an order signed Jan. 17, 1986, President Reagan chose to circumvent the law to keep Congress from knowing about covert U.S. arms sales to Iran and their link to winning release of U.S. hostages in Lebanon. The operation was not revealed until November.<

"As I have looked back on that entire period," Gates said Tuesday, "the only real regret that I have and the one mistake that I think we at the agency made, that I made, was in not pressing ... for a reversal of the direction not to notify the Congress."<

Under tough questioning from Sen. Bill Bradley, D-N.J., he went so far as to say he would consider resigning if he were CIA director and were asked to delay notification of covert activity to Congress.<

Withholding information in the Iran affair stretched the relationship between the intelligence community and Congress to the breaking point, Gates said.<

"I would like to think that I would have gone to the president and revisited the issue of prior notification," he said. "Perhaps if that had happened and he said no, then I would have contemplated resigning."<

Intelligence committee members have charged that the failed Iran policy might never have been implemented if Congress had the opportunity to learn about it beforehand. At the least, they say, the affair might not have deteriorated into an arms-for-hostages swap irreconcilable with U.S.

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policy.<

But Congress is mindful it has made a contribution to the estrangement with the executive branch, and Gates noted that briefly in his opening statement.<

"We must do something about unauthorized disclosures," he said. "The cost to our capabilities from leaks ... has been catastrophic."<

Sources with the select House committee investigating the Iran-Contra scandal have indicated that a leak-free probe is at least a part of the committee's self-imposed mandate to allay administration fears it "can't be trusted."<

"We certainly don't want to prove them right," one source said.<